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BATTLE



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TORONTO

BATTLE

BY

WILFRID WILSON GIBSON

AUTHOR OF "DAILY BREAD," "FIRES," "BORDERLANDS
AND THOROUGHFARES," ETC.

New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1915

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TO MY WIFE

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BATTLE

BEFORE ACTION

I sit beside the brazier's glow,
And, drowsing in the heat,
I dream of daffodils that blow
And lambs that frisk and bleat—

Black lambs that frolic in the snow
Among the daffodils,
In a far orchard that I know
Beneath the Malvern hills.

Next year the daffodils will blow,
And lambs will frisk and bleat;
But I'll not feel the brazier's glow,
Nor any cold or heat.

BATTLE

BREAKFAST

We eat our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.
I bet a rasher to a loaf of bread
That Hull United would beat Halifax
When Jimmy Stainthorpe played full-back
instead
Of Billy Bradford. Ginger raised his head
And cursed, and took the bet; and dropt
back dead.
We eat our breakfast lying on our backs,
Because the shells were screeching overhead.

THE BAYONET

THE BAYONET

This bloody steel
Has killed a man.
I heard him squeal
As on I ran.

He watched me come
With wagging head.
I pressed it home,
And he was dead.

Though clean and clear
I've wiped the steel,
I still can hear
That dying squeal.

THE QUESTION

I wonder if the old cow died or not.

Gey bad she was the night I left, and sick.

Dick reckoned she would mend. He knows a
lot—

At least he fancies so himself, does Dick.

Dick knows a lot. But maybe I did wrong

To leave the cow to him, and come away.

Over and over like a silly song

These words keep bumming in my head all
day.

And all I think of, as I face the foe

And take my lucky chance of being shot,

Is this—that if I'm hit, I'll never know

Till Doomsday if the old cow died or not.

THE RETURN

THE RETURN

He went, and he was gay to go;
And I smiled on him as he went.
My son—'twas well he couldn't know
My darkest dread, nor what it meant—

Just what it meant to smile and smile
And let my son go cheerily—
My son . . . and wondering all the while
What stranger would come back to me.

BATTLE

SALVAGE

So suddenly her life
Had crashed about that grey old country
 wife,
Naked she stood, and gazed
Bewildered, while her home about her blazed,
New-widowed, and bereft
Of her five sons, she clung to what was left,
Still hugging all she'd got—
A toy gun and a copper coffee-pot.

DEAF

DEAF

This day last year I heard the curlew calling
By Hallypike
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

But now I cannot hear the shrapnel's scream-
ing,

The screech of shells:
And if again I see the blue lough gleaming
Among the fells

Unheard of me will be the curlew's calling
By Hallypike
And the clear tinkle of hill-waters falling
Down slack and syke.

BATTLE

MAD

Neck-deep in mud,
He mowed and raved—
He who had braved
The field of blood—

And as a lad
Just out of school
Yelled: “April fool!”
And laughed like mad.

RAINING

RAINING

The night I left my father said:

“You’ll go and do some stupid thing.

You’ve no more sense in that fat head

Than Silly Billy Witterling.

“Not sense to come in when it rains—

Not sense enough for that, you’ve got.

You’ll get a bullet through your brains,

Before you know, as like as not.”

And now I’m lying in the trench

And shells and bullets through the night

Are raining in a steady drench,

I’m thinking the old man was right.

BATTLE

SPORT

And such a morning for cubbing—
The dew so thick on the grass!
Two hares are lolloping just out of range
Scattering the dew as they pass.

A covey of partridge whirrs overhead
Scatheless, and gets clean away;
For it's other and crueller, craftier game
We're out for and after to-day!

THE FEAR

THE FEAR

I do not fear to die
'Neath the open sky,
To meet death in the fight
Face to face, upright.

But when at last we creep
In a hole to sleep,
I tremble, cold with dread,
Lest I wake up dead.

BATTLE

IN THE AMBULANCE

“Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.”

That's what he is muttering,
Making such a song,
Keeping other chaps awake,
The whole night long.

Both his legs are shot away,
And his head is light;
So he keeps on muttering
All the blessed night.

HILL-BORN

“Two rows of cabbages,
Two of curly-greens,
Two rows of early peas,
Two of kidney-beans.”

HILL-BORN

I sometimes wonder if it's really true
I ever knew
Another life
Than this unending strife
With unseen enemies in lowland mud,
And wonder if my blood
Thrilled ever to the tune
Of clean winds blowing through an April noon
Mile after sunny mile
On the green ridges of the Windy Gile.

THE FATHER

That was his sort.
It didn't matter
What we were at
But he must chatter
Of this and that
His little son
Had said and done:
Till, as he told
The fiftieth time
Without a change
How three-year-old
Prattled a rhyme,
They got the range
And cut him short.

THE REEK

THE REEK

To-night they're sitting by the peat
Talking of me, I know—
Grandfather in the ingle-seat,
Mother and Meg and Joe.

I feel a sudden puff of heat
That sets my ears aglow,
And smell the reek of burning peat
Across the Belgian snow.

BATTLE

NIGHTMARE

They gave him a shilling,
They gave him a gun,
And so he's gone killing
The Germans, my son.

I dream of that shilling—
I dream of that gun—
And it's they that are killing
The boy who's my son.

COMRADES

COMRADES

As I was marching in Flanders
A ghost kept step with me—
Kept step with me and chuckled
And muttered ceaselessly:

“Once I too marched in Flanders,
The very spit of you,
And just a hundred years since,
To fall at Waterloo.

“They buried me in Flanders
Upon the field of blood,
And long I’ve lain forgotten
Deep in the Flemish mud.

BATTLE

“But now you march in Flanders,
The very spit of me;
To the ending of the day’s march
I’ll bear you company.”

THE LARK

A lull in the racket and brattle,
And a lark soars into the light—
And its song seems the voice of the light
Quelling the voices of night
And the shattering fury of battle.

But again the fury of battle
Breaks out, and he drops from the height—
Dead as a stone from the height—
Drops dead, and the voice of the light
Is drowned in the shattering brattle.

THE VOW

THE VOW

Does he ever remember,
The lad that I knew,
That night in September
He vowed to be true—

Does he hear my heart crying
And fighting for breath
In the land where he's lying
As quiet as death?

MANGEL-WURZELS

Last year I was hoeing,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels,
Hoeing mangel-wurzels all day in the sun,
Hoeing for the squire
Down in Gloucestershire
Willy-nilly till the sweaty job was done.

Now I'm in the 'wurzels,
In the mangel-wurzels,
All day in the 'wurzels 'neath the Belgian
sun.

But among this little lot
It's a different job I've got—
For you don't hoe mangel-wurzels with a
gun.

HIS FATHER

HIS FATHER

I quite forgot to put the spigot in.

It's just come over me. . . . And it is queer

To think he'll not care if we lose or win

And yet be jumping-mad about that beer.

I left it running full. He must have said

A thing or two. I'd give my stripes to hear

What he will say if I'm reported dead

Before he gets me told about that beer!

BATTLE

HIT

Out of the sparkling sea
I drew my tingling body clear, and lay
On a low ledge the livelong summer day,
Basking, and watching lazily
White sails in Falmouth Bay.

My body seemed to burn
Salt in the sun that drenched it through and
through
Till every particle glowed clean and new
And slowly seemed to turn
To lucent amber in a world of blue. . . .

BACK

I felt a sudden wrench—
A trickle of warm blood—
And found that I was sprawling in the mud
Among the dead men in the trench.

BACK

They ask me where I've been,
And what I've done and seen.
But what can I reply
Who know it wasn't I,
But someone just like me,
Who went across the sea
And with my head and hands
Killed men in foreign lands. . . .
Though I must bear the blame
Because he bore my name.

BATTLE

HIS MATE

“Hi-diddle-diddle
The cat and the fiddle” . . .

I raised my head,
And saw him seated on a heap of dead,
Yelling the nursery-tune,
Grimacing at the moon. . . .

“And the cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed to see such sport
And the dish ran away with the spoon.”

And, as he stopt to snigger,
I struggled to my knees and pulled the
trigger.

THE DANCERS

THE DANCERS

All day beneath the hurtling shells
Before my burning eyes
Hover the dainty demoiselles—
The peacock dragon-flies.

Unceasingly they dart and glance
Above the stagnant stream—
And I am fighting here in France
As in a senseless dream—

A dream of shattering black shells
That hurtle overhead,
And dainty dancing demoiselles
Above the dreamless dead.

BATTLE

THE JOKE

He'd even have his joke
While we were sitting tight,
And so he needs must poke
His silly head in sight
To whisper some new jest
Chortling, but as he spoke
A rifle cracked. . . .
And now God knows when I shall hear the
rest!

CHERRIES

CHERRIES

A handful of cherries
She gave me in passing,
The wizened old woman,
And wished me good luck—

And again I was dreaming,
A boy in the sunshine,
And life but an orchard
Of cherries to pluck.

BATTLE

THE HOUSEWIFE

She must go back, she said,
Because she'd not had time to make the bed.
We'd hurried her away
So roughly . . . and, for all that we could
say,
She broke from us, and passed
Into the night, shells falling thick and fast.

VICTORY

VICTORY

I watched it oozing quietly
Out of the gaping gash.
The lads thrust on to victory
With lunge and curse and crash.

Half-dazed, that uproar seemed to me
Like some old battle-sound
Heard long ago, as quietly
His blood soaked in the ground.

The lads thrust on to victory
With lunge and crash and shout.
I lay and watched, as quietly
His life was running out.

BATTLE

THE MESSAGES

“I cannot quite remember. . . . There were
five

Dropt dead beside me in the trench—and
three

Whispered their dying messages to me. . . .”

Back from the trenches, more dead than
alive,

Stone-deaf and dazed, and with a broken
knee,

He hobbled slowly, muttering vacantly:

“I cannot quite remember. . . . There were
five

Dropt dead beside me in the trench, and three
Whispered their dying messages to me. . . .

THE MESSAGES

“Their friends are waiting, wondering how
they thrive—

Waiting a word in silence patiently. . . .

But what they said, or who their friends
may be

“I cannot quite remember. . . . There were
five

Dropt dead beside me in the trench,—and
three

Whispered their dying messages to me. . . .”

THE QUIET

I could not understand the sudden quiet—
The sudden darkness—in the crash of fight,
The din and glare of day quenched in a
 twinkling
In utter starless night.

I lay an age and idly gazed at nothing,
Half-puzzled that I could not lift my head;
And then I knew somehow that I was lying
Among the other dead.

BETWEEN THE LINES

BETWEEN THE LINES

When consciousness came back, he found
he lay

Between the opposing fires, but could not
tell

On which hand were his friends; and either
way

For him to turn was chancey—bullet and
shell

Whistling and shrieking over him, as the
glare

Of searchlights scoured the darkness to blind
day.

He scrambled to his hands and knees ascare,
Dragging his wounded foot through puddled
clay,

BATTLE

And tumbled in a hole a shell had scooped
At random in a turnip-field between
The unseen trenches where the foes lay
cooped

Through that unending battle of unseen
Dead-locked league-stretching armies; and
quite spent

He rolled upon his back within the pit,
And lay secure, thinking of all it meant—
His lying in that little hole, sore hit,
But living, while across the starry sky
Shrapnel and shell went screeching over-
head—

Of all it meant that he, Tom Dodd, should lie
Among the Belgian turnips, while his bed. . . .

If it were he, indeed, who'd climbed each
night,

BETWEEN THE LINES

Fagged with the day's work, up the narrow
stair,

And slipt his clothes off in the candle-light,
Too tired to fold them neatly on a chair
The way his mother'd taught him—too dog-
tired

After the long day's serving in the shop,
Inquiring what each customer required,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop. . . .

And now for fourteen days and nights, at least,
He hadn't had his clothes off; and had lain
In muddy trenches, napping like a beast
With one eye open, under sun and rain
And that unceasing hell-fire. . . .

It was strange
How things turned out—the chances! You'd
just got

BATTLE

To take your luck in life, you couldn't
change

Your luck.

And so here he was lying shot
Who just six months ago had thought to
spend

His days behind a counter. Still, per-
haps. . . .

And now, God only knew how he would end!

He'd like to know how many of the chaps
Had won back to the trench alive, when he
Had fallen wounded and been left for dead.
If any! . . .

This was different, certainly,
From selling knots of tape and reels of thread
And knots of tape and reels of thread and
knots

BETWEEN THE LINES

Of tape and reels of thread and knots of
tape,

Day in, day out, and answering "Have you
got's"

And "Do you keep's," till there seemed no
escape

From everlasting serving in a shop,

Inquiring what each customer required,

Politely talking weather, fit to drop,

With swollen ankles, tired. . . .

But he was tired

Now. Every bone was aching, and had
ached

For fourteen days and nights in that wet
trench—

Just duller when he slept than when he
waked—

Crouching for shelter from the steady drench

BATTLE

Of shell and shrapnel. . . .

That old trench, it seemed
Almost like home to him. He'd slept and
fed

And sung and smoked in it, while shrapnel
screamed

And shells went whining harmless overhead—
Harmless, at least, as far as he. . . .

But Dick—

Dick hadn't found them harmless yesterday,
At breakfast, when he'd said he couldn't
stick

Eating dry bread, and crawled out the back
way,

And brought them butter in a lordly dish—
Butter enough for all, and held it high,
Yellow and fresh and clean as you could
wish—

BETWEEN THE LINES

When plump upon the plate from out the
sky

A shell fell bursting. . . . Where the butter
went,

God only knew! . . .

And Dick. . . . He dared not think
Of what had come to Dick . . . or what it
meant—

The shrieking and the whistling and the
stink

He'd lived in fourteen days and nights.

'Twas luck

That he still lived. . . . And queer how
little then

He seemed to care that Dick. . . . Perhaps
'twas pluck

That hardened him—a man among the
men—

BATTLE

Perhaps. . . . Yet, only think things out a
bit.

And he was rabbit-livered, blue with funk!
And he'd liked Dick . . . and yet when
Dick was hit,

He hadn't turned a hair. The meanest
skunk

He should have thought would feel it when
his mate

Was blown to smithereens—Dick, proud as
Punch,

Grinning like sin, and holding up the plate—
But he had gone on munching his dry hunch,
Unwinking, till he swallowed the last crumb.

Perhaps 'twas just because he dared not let
His mind run upon Dick, who'd been his
chum.

BETWEEN THE LINES

He dared not now, though he could not
forget.

Dick took his luck. And, life or death,
'twas luck

From first to last; and you'd just got to trust
Your luck and grin. It wasn't so much
pluck

As knowing that you'd got to, when needs
must,

And better to die grinning. . . .

Quiet now

Had fallen on the night. On either hand
The guns were quiet. Cool upon his brow
The quiet darkness brooded, as he scanned
The starry sky. He'd never seen before
So many stars. Although, of course, he'd
known

BATTLE

That there were stars, somehow before the
war

He'd never realized them—so thick-sown,
Millions and millions. Serving in the shop,
Stars didn't count for much; and then at
nights

Strolling the pavements, dull and fit to drop,
You didn't see much but the city lights.

He'd never in his life seen so much sky
As he'd seen this last fortnight. It was queer
The things war taught you. He'd a mind
to try

To count the stars—they shone so bright
and clear.

One, two, three, four. . . . Ah, God, but he
was tired. . . .

Five, six, seven, eight. . . .

Yes: it was number eight.

BETWEEN THE LINES

And what was the next thing that she required?

(Too bad of customers to come so late,
At closing-time!) Again within the shop
He handled knots of tape and reels of thread,
Politely talking weather, fit to drop. . . .

When once again the whole sky overhead
Flared blind with search lights, and the shriek
of shell

And scream of shrapnel roused him. Drowsily

He stared about him wondering. Then he
fell

Into deep dreamless slumber.

.
He could see

BATTLE

Two dark eyes peeping at him, ere he knew
He was awake, and it again was day—
An August morning burning to clear blue.
The frightened rabbit scuttled. . . .

Far away,
A sound of firing. . . . Up there, in the sky
Big dragon-flies hung hovering. . . . Snow-
balls burst
About them. . . .

Flies and snowballs! With a cry
He crouched to watch the airmen pass—the
first
That he'd seen under fire. Lord, that was
pluck—
Shells bursting all about them—and what
nerve!
They took their chance, and trusted to their
luck.

BETWEEN THE LINES

At such a dizzy height to dip and swerve,
Dodging the shell-fire. . . .

Hell! but one was hit,
And tumbling like a pigeon plump. . . .

Thank Heaven,
It righted, and then turned; and after it
The whole flock followed safe—four, five,
six, seven,

Yes, they were all there safe. He hoped
they'd win

Back to their lines in safety. They de-
served,

Even if they were Germans. . . . 'Twas no
sin

To wish them luck. Think how that beggar
swerved

Just in the nick of time!

He, too, must try

BATTLE

To win back to the lines, though, likely as
not,

He'd take the wrong turn: but he couldn't
lie

Forever in that hungry hole and rot.

He'd got to take his luck, to take his chance
Of being sniped by foes or friends. He'd
be

With any luck in Germany or France
Or kingdom-come, next morning. . . .

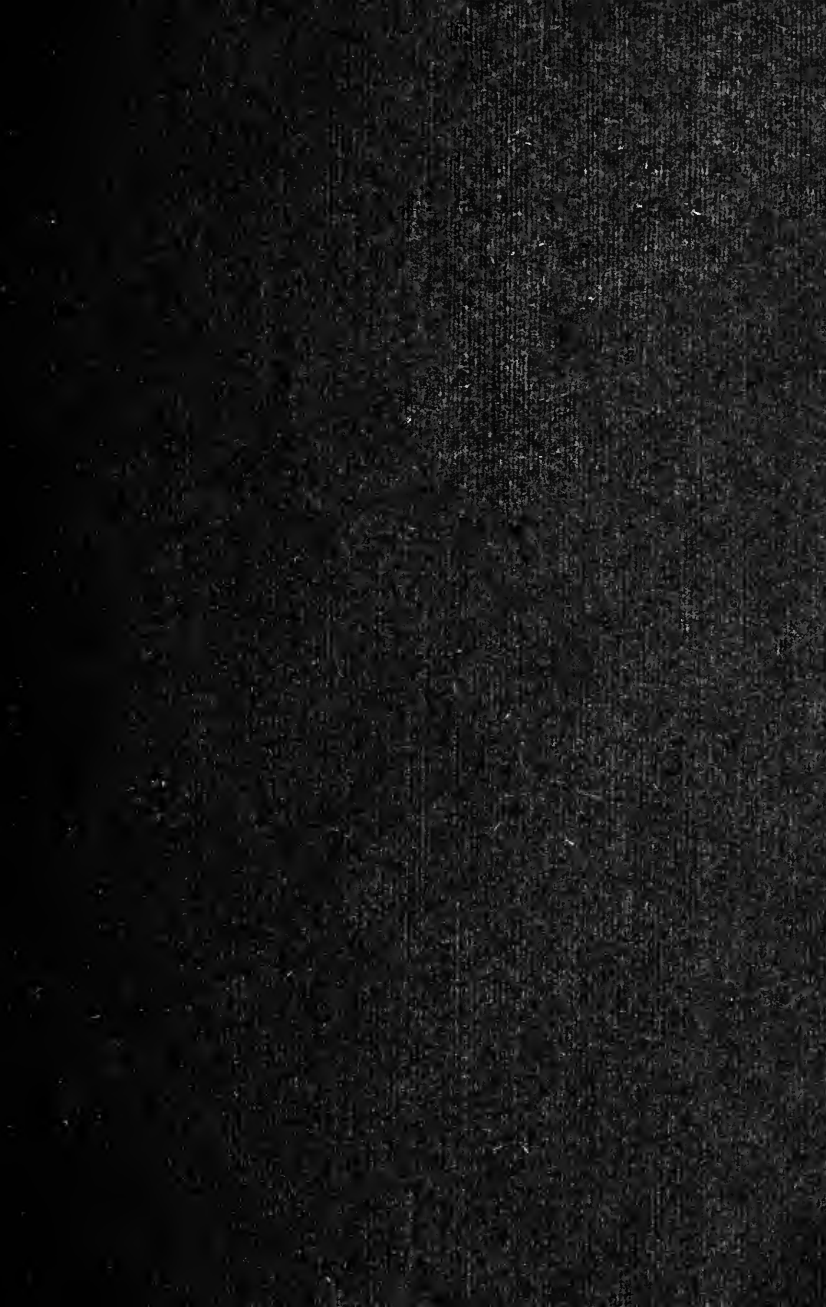
Drearily

The blazing day burnt over him. Shot and
shell

Whistling and whining ceaselessly. But
light

Faded at last, and as the darkness fell

He rose, and crawled away into the night.



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